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Diva Faustina: Coinage and Cult in Rome and the Provinces

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Book Review

Diva Faustina: Coinage and Cult in Rome and the Provinces

By Martin Beckmann (Numismatic Studies 26). Pp. xii + 170, figs. 73, b&w pls. 36, charts 18. The American Numismatic Society, New York 2012. \$95. ISBN 978-0-89722-322-5 (cloth).

Reviewed by

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120.2

Faustina the Elder (ca. 100–140 C.E.) was Augusta (empress) of the Roman empire for two years, from the accession of her husband Antoninus Pius to the throne in 138 to her death. She was the mother of Faustina the Younger (ca. 125/130–175) and adopted mother of the later emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. She was also genealogically linked to the emperors Trajan and Hadrian. Her name is prominently present on the inscription of the large temple in the Roman forum, dedicated to Diva Faustina and Divus Antoninus. This apparently central, dynastic position in second-century Roman emperorship has not led to much scholarly attention until recently, as Beckmann notes at the very beginning of his monograph (2). Since the appearance of this volume, that lacuna has been admirably filled by Levick's recent *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age* (Oxford 2014), which only incorporated an earlier article by Beckmann. Notwithstanding the author's criticism of the lack of attention to Faustina by modern scholars, this book is not concerned with Faustina as such, nor really (despite the title) with the cult of the divine Faustina. Instead, it focuses on the empress' public image after her death as reflected in coinage, especially for the city of Rome. The book is effectively a careful analysis of the commemoration of the deified empress through centrally minted coins, contextualized by regular comparisons with other types of sources in Rome, and occasional comparisons with coinage in the provinces.

Within these limitations, this is an extremely useful and carefully argued book. Beckmann traces the late empress' image through a systematic analysis of coin types dedicated to Faustina, especially the aurei. The basis of his argument is a catalogue of 916 gold coins (107–51). A catalogue of sestertius dies with the legend DIVA AVG(VSTA) FAVSTINA follows (153–67), with a reference to the American Numismatic Society website for further (DIVA FAVSTINA) sestertius dies. At the end of the volume there are clear plates showing images of obverse and reverse types, systematic die charts, and a minimal but fairly useful index.

After a brief introduction (1–4), chapter 1 (5–17) sets out the methods through which these coins are analyzed, with much emphasis on die studies. As Beckmann demonstrates, there are linked aureus

series that give us a complete picture of gold coins issued for Diva Faustina, which can occasionally be placed in a fixed chronology by shared die links to coins of family members. This allows the author to date accurately the aurei and recognize which changes in coin types developed gradually and which developed suddenly. This clear chronology is essential for understanding the developments of four themes on the gold coins that are central to chapters 2–5, which form the main thrust of the book: CONSECratio (on the deification [19–39]), DEDICATIO AEDIS (on the Temple of the Divine Faustina [41–50]), VOTA PUBLICA (on the marriage of Faustina the Younger [51–62]), and AETERNITAS (on the anniversary of the deification [63–72]). A final chapter (ch. 6 [73–91]) places the coinage that was issued for Diva Faustina in the 140s and 150s in the context of commemoration “outside the capital and in non-numismatic media both within and outside Rome” (73).

In the four thematic chapters, Beckmann traces the chronology of the coin types and then argues how images in these coin types relate to major historical events. This allows him to make valuable observations. The enormous numismatic attention to Diva Faustina was unprecedented, and the various types struck in her name seem to have reflected a range of historical events, placing the deified empress squarely within Roman society. In that way, the Elder Faustina’s central dynastic position continued posthumously, particularly in relation to the wedding of Faustina the Younger and the birth of the latter’s first daughter, Annia Faustina. These important dynastic events can be traced by looking at marked changes in the iconography of dominating types of gold coinage. Likewise, modification in the posthumous coinage following the 10th anniversary of Faustina’s deification suggests that attention shifted away from the dead empress toward her living daughter and grandchildren. In the last chapter, developments on central coinage (and to a lesser extent sculptural display in the city of Rome) is contrasted with coinage and sculpture in the provinces. In Beckmann’s analysis, Diva Faustina’s dominant position in Rome apparently was not reciprocated in the provinces, where she was much less frequently commemorated. This limited attention on provincial coins is not entirely surprising since from the later reigns of the Julio-Claudians onward provincial coinage increasingly focused on imperial wives and children. Indeed, Faustina the Elder was the last deceased empress to feature on provincial coinage—a development that the author could have included in his argument.

Perhaps the most important criticism of this book is that the author pays minimal attention both to how the development of the commemoration of the deified empress relates to further developments in the commemoration of members of the imperial house as well as to the role coins played in imperial representations as such. There is surprisingly little attention to the questions of who issued coins and how these coins were perceived. The role of central coinage in communication and commemoration is assumed but not analyzed. Throughout the volume, Beckmann places the ancient evidence, especially the coin types, at the fore, and develops his arguments from there. The precision with which he analyzes his source material is commendable, but occasionally more engagement with recent scholarship would be welcome. For instance, Rowan has recently argued in *Proceedings of the XIV International Numismatic Congress* (C. Rowan, “Communicating a Consecratio: The Deification Coinage of Faustina I” [Glasgow 2011] 991–98), in which Beckmann himself also published an article, that changes of Faustina’s titulature on provincial coinage and the very fact that there was continuation of her image on these coins after her death show recognition of Faustina’s posthumous visual presence in the capital. It would have been good to see Beckmann react to these conclusions, which go against his own findings.

None of this takes away from the importance of this impressive and immensely detailed work, which shows once more how crucial analysis of coin types is for our understanding of Roman history.

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